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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

16 June 1970

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Short-Term Prospects for the Lon Nol Government
(Revised)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	
I. THE COMMUNIST THREAT	2
A. VC/NVA Military Activities	2
B. Communist Capabilities and Intentions.....	4
II. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE LON NOL GOVERNMENT	11
A. Military Capabilities	11
B. Domestic Political Factors.....	15
III. PROSPECTS	21

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SUBJECT: Short-Term Prospects for the Lon Nol Government
(Revised)

1. Introduction. Despite its shaky condition, the Lon Nol regime has stood for almost three months.* Whether it can stand much longer will depend for the most part on external forces: the strategy employed by Hanoi and the military assistance provided by the Allies. But it will also rest on the willingness of Lon Nol's fellow Cambodians to support him against whatever domestic opposition may develop under the titular leadership of Prince Sihanouk.

* Sihanouk was ousted on 18 March.

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I. THE COMMUNIST THREAT

A. Recent VC/NVA Military Activities

2. The Communists appeared to be as surprised by the ouster of Sihanouk as we were, despite their obvious apprehension over unfavorable developments in Cambodia since mid-1969. But documents and prisoners taken during the subsequent Allied thrust into Cambodia indicate that Communist plans to move against Cambodian targets were available very soon after Sihanouk's ouster. In any event, ⁱⁿ the first week of April VC/NVA units opened attacks on Cambodian towns, first in the "Parrot's Beak" and then elsewhere in the border region. By the end of April, sizeable Communist forces had moved well into Cambodia to capture towns along the Mekong, and were threatening Kompong Cham, Cambodia's third largest city. To the south, their moves appeared menace to Phnom Penh itself.

3. In their moves against Cambodian targets, many Communist formations were broken down into small units which fanned out into the countryside, cutting telecommunications, destroying key bridges, sacking the houses of local political leaders, securing rice supplies, and recruiting ethnic Vietnamese inhabitants. The Cambodian population was propagandized in the name of Sihanouk and his "Liberation Army."

- 2 -

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4. The large-scale movement of US/ARVN forces into Cambodia on 1 May changed this picture of unrelieved gloom for the Lon Nol regime. US/ARVN forces swept through VC/NVA sanctuaries all along the border. ARVN and "Khmer Krom" (ethnic Cambodians from South Vietnam) forces, unrestricted by the self-imposed 21.7-mile operating limit on US ground combat units, eased Communist pressures on Kompong Cham and Phnom Penh, and cleared most key points east and south of the capital. Most of these actions did not involve heavy combat. The Communists avoided major confrontations with the better-equipped US/ARVN units by moving out of their bases and maneuvering to avoid encirclement. Nevertheless, more than half of their combat forces in Cambodia remained within 21.7 miles of the border. The rest moved deeper into Cambodia, some into the northeastern region, where such moves seemed designed to secure the Communist lifeline between North and South Vietnam. By mid-May, however, Communist forces began a series of moves westward across Northern Cambodia and by early June, fighting had reached Angkor, ancient capital of the Khmer nation. Such moves have raised questions about Hanoi's short-term intentions vis-a-vis the Lon Nol regime.

-3-

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B. Communist Capabilities and Intentions

5. Capabilities: VC/NVA Forces. As of late March, the Communists appear to have had some 50,000-60,000 troops* in the Cambodian-South Vietnamese border region. These forces included 13 infantry regiments, only four or five of which have moved into Cambodia beyond the 21.7 mile limit. Thus, should the Communists decide to devote higher priority to operations deeper in Cambodia, they have additional forces in the border area, some of which could be used without waiting for reinforcements from North Vietnam. Although VC/NVA units dislodged by Allied sweeps had to leave great quantities of food and ammunition behind in base area caches, they seem to have obtained locally or been able to transport from the sanctuary areas sufficient amounts of both to meet their limited campaigning requirements in Cambodia so far. Over the longer term, their supply problems may grow, particularly in zones far removed from the Laos corridor. And if Allied ground forces and air power are brought to bear, they will have difficulty in taking and holding major towns and key transport routes.

* This is a tentative up-date of our estimate of the strength of these forces, in the light of new evidence obtained from prisoners and documents captured in the recent Cambodian operations. This figure will probably be further revised in the near future as new evidence is obtained and our estimate refined.

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6. Capabilities: Khmer Insurgents. It is difficult to estimate the military potential represented by the Cambodian Communist insurgents. They have not amounted to much in the past. From 1950 to 1954 they were associated with the Vietnamese-controlled Vietminh, and for this reason the movement was unable to gain much support from ethnic Cambodians. The more recent Communist insurgency in Cambodia began in early 1967 in the western province of Battambang when small armed bands, protesting the government's restrictive rice purchasing policies, began attacking civil and military outposts. These disturbances were put down, but rebel activity flared up again in the province in 1968. In late 1967, guerrilla activity had emerged in Cambodia's eastern and northeastern provinces, along the South Vietnamese border.

7. In the northeast, the rebels are semi-nomadic, montagnard tribesmen seeking to cast off the authority of the central government on the pattern of hill tribes everywhere in Southeast Asia. The rebel groups operating further south, around COSVN, are probably more significant in Communist plans. In general, they are ethnic Cambodians, many from South Vietnam,

-5-

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and many have been members of the clandestine Communist Party of Cambodia since 1954. Most of the leaders are said to be former members of the Vietminh, Khmer-Vietminh, or Khmer Issarak (the old Cambodian independence movement).

8. We have little information about any of these Cambodian insurgent groups. They probably did not total more than 5,000 prior to Sihanouk's ouster. Those in the east and northeast, at least, were armed with Chinese Communist weapons supplied by North Vietnam. Though small in numbers, these insurgent forces will provide a useful nucleus for Hanoi as it moves to build Sihanouk's "Cambodian Liberation Army". Recent reports indicate that in some instances, experienced Cambodian communists are being used to explain VC/NVA motives to Cambodian villagers, to solicit local support, and to recruit personnel to their ranks. The effectiveness of these efforts may not determine the success or failure of Hanoi's military campaign in Cambodia -- which as in Laos will be the burden of VC/NVA units -- but it would be highly advantageous politically if Hanoi were able to develop something approaching a credible Khmer resistance movement.

-6-

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9. Intentions. Beyond the necessity for sheer survival in the face of Allied assaults on their base areas, the recent maneuvers of VC/NVA forces in Cambodia evidence a clear intention to give priority to the maintenance of channels of supply and infiltration into South Vietnam. They have not moved the bulk of their troops great distances from the border and they are protecting and expanding routes in areas of northeastern Cambodia adjacent to the Laos corridor. And recent Communist military activity in southern Laos is undoubtedly a related move.

10. Hanoi's actions in attacking towns near Phnom Penh and interdicting routes to the capital, and its recent thrust toward Siem Reap and Angkor, however, do not appear related to Communist tactical requirements in South Vietnam. We can only speculate on the reasons for such moves. The VC/NVA attacks may be intended to cripple and demoralize the meager military force at the disposal of the government; to create serious insecurity in the countryside; to isolate the populace from the central government; and to wreck the national economy. The general impression thereby created would be one of a weak and ineffective regime, incapable of defending even its major towns, and utterly dependent on Allied support. The effect would be to discourage the faint

-7-

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of heart among Cambodians and to encourage political opposition to Lon Nol in Phnom Penh itself. Internationally, the regime would lose prestige and be tagged as a US puppet, on the Laos pattern. Benefits to the Communist side would also include development of an image of great strength which, in time, would assist military and political recruiting among the populace and improve longer range prospects in the full-scale "liberation struggle" certain to afflict Cambodia over the next few years.

-8-

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11. Alternatively, it may be that the Communist forces in Cambodia are bent on fairly rapid destruction of Lon Nol's authority and his replacement by a regime sympathetic to Hanoi's cause, led perhaps by Sihanouk. The Communists might view a pro-Hanoi takeover in Phnom Penh at this time as a political/psychological victory of major proportions, with the administration in Washington becoming sufficiently demoralized to soften its negotiating position. They might be concerned to make their move before substantial numbers of Vietnamese, Thai, South Korean, or other Asian troops (with US air support) could be marshalled against them -- or before the Khmer army itself could be equipped and trained. And they might believe that their puppets in any successor regime in Phnom Penh could generate an important degree of international support for a cease-fire which had the effect of re-establishing Communist sanctuaries on Cambodian soil.

12. We cannot, of course, exclude the possibility of this sort of bold maneuver by the Communists in the near term. It may be that Hanoi itself is uncertain of its precise military course and is still weighing the potential

- 9 -

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gains against the possible costs. For one thing, Hanoi could not be sure that an open assault on Phnom Penh would be successful. There would almost certainly be resistance by the Cambodians themselves and, more important, ARVN units with US air support might participate in the defense. The military costs of taking the capital, therefore, might be relatively high; and if the Communists failed, there would be considerable prestige lost. Even a successful outcome at the gates of Phnom Penh would not automatically confer immunity from further Allied attacks on their forces in Cambodia; indeed, in the Communist view, Allied assaults -- and a continuing naval blockade -- might be all the more certain, international reactions notwithstanding.

13. Nor would we rate Sihanouk's return as an unalloyed benefit in Hanoi's eyes. The North Vietnamese probably see him now as an agent of the Chinese, tolerable and useful in Peking but politically unreliable in Phnom Penh. Certainly Hanoi would prefer to establish its grip on the Cambodian peasantry before the popular Sihanouk were returned to his people.

- 10 -

SECRET

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14. Finally, in moving to occupy Phnom Penh (and other major towns and populated areas) the Communists would have sacrificed their beloved "liberation" tactics and accepted all the liabilities of a conventional defensive force operating against a better-equipped enemy. And Communist manpower requirements for policing and administering almost 7,000,000 Cambodians, or a larger part thereof, would seem excessive until sufficient Khmer personnel had been indoctrinated and trained to Hanoi's standards.

15. In sum, we doubt that Hanoi presently sees the game as worth the candle. Lon Nol can be denigrated and his regime shaken without storming his capital -- as the Communists are presently demonstrating. And his ouster would offer no guarantee of a return to the pre-March situation of border sanctuaries and maritime supply lines.

II. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE LON NOL GOVERNMENT

A. Military Capabilities

16. Prior to the ouster of Sihanouk, the Cambodian Armed Force totalled about 38,000 men, almost all in the

- 11 -

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Army.* The main role of the military was that of a civic action and internal security force. The Army lacked qualified officers, was poorly trained, and had low morale. Although fighting units had new Communist equipment, their overall combat effectiveness was low.

17. In recent months, the Cambodian armed forces have mushroomed in size to something on the order of 100,000 men. This fantastic expansion was accomplished by calling up reserves and retirees, mobilizing provincial guard personnel, and recruiting young volunteers. The main growth, of course, has been concentrated in the ground forces. The number of combat battalions has jumped from 55 to over 150. Although many of these are still in the early stages of formation, they now total some 65,000 men and when fleshed out to the increased battalion strength of some 600 men, these combat forces alone will total nearly 100,000. The mediocre leadership has been stretched even thinner than before. The new units are being equipped from existing stores of Chinese, US, Soviet, French, and Belgian weapons.

* Army - 35,000; Air Force - 1,750; and Navy - 1,400. Paramilitary forces of various types included about 50,000 armed men.

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This has created a difficult supply problem and ammunition stores have been rapidly depleted. Moreover, the new units have been only briefly and inadequately trained. Their initial high morale derived from rallying to the national "cause" has not proved durable in battle, and they have fared poorly against VC/NVA forces in combat. With the exception of a few actions, wherever the Communists have been repulsed or forced to withdraw, South Vietnamese forces or allied airstrikes have played the key role.

18. Potential. In terms of sheer numbers, Cambodia has the manpower resources to field a relatively large ground force. Of a total population of some 6.8 million, there are about 1.1 million males between the ages of 15 and 35. The present leadership is talking in overly ambitious terms of an armed forces goal of 300,000. Obviously, the Cambodian government has insufficient money, equipment, and leadership in Cambodia to train and field its existing force adequately to say nothing of one of such expanded size without substantial external assistance. Moreover, there is considerable question as to whether a Cambodian armed force of any size will ever be really effective in combat against

- 13 -

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the Vietnamese Communists. Although the defense of their homeland against a long-hated invader should provide them with the motivation, and although the performance of the Khmer Krom forces has shown that ethnic Cambodians can fight effectively, the extremely poor showing of the Cambodian forces thus far raises serious doubts as to whether they can ever be made into an effective fighting force, at least in time to do any good, whatever the level of outside assistance in training and equipment.

- 14 -

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B. Domestic Political Factors

19. When they took control, the new Cambodian leaders moved quickly to consolidate their position. The Cabinet and both houses of the National Assembly continued to display the same unity and support for Lon Nol and Sirik Matak that they had throughout the months leading up to Sihanouk's ouster. A few administrative figures whose allegiance was questionable were removed from their posts. For the most part, provincial governors and ambassadors, and the bureaucracy fell into line.

20. But the acceptance of the Lon Nol regime by the existing establishment in Phnom Penh and the provincial capitals does not assure its political standing in Cambodia. The overthrow of Sihanouk has released long suppressed social and political forces in the country and Cambodia may be entering a period of political ferment in which new figures and factions will continue to emerge and contend for power. The groups with power in Cambodia, whose support is essential to the new regime and from whose ranks the new leaders will probably emerge, are the urban elite, the army, the students, the Buddhists, and the peasantry.

- 15 -

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21. The Elite and the Students. For years, the Cambodian elite has been quite unhappy with Sihanouk's policies of economic nationalization and his accommodations with the Vietnamese Communists. Although they have some qualms about the Army's predominant role in the present government, they generally approve of Lon Nol and Sirik Matak. The students and young intellectuals, another key group, also seem well disposed toward the new regime. In the past, they have been frustrated by Sihanouk in their efforts to reform the government and gain a greater role in its administration. Although many have been influenced by leftist ideas in school few seem sympathetic to Sihanouk now. Indeed, the students appear to constitute one of the greatest elements of support for the new regime and are pressing for termination of the monarchy in favor of a republican form of government.

22. The Army. The real power in Cambodia today lies with the Army. If the officers remain loyal to the new leadership, it is difficult to imagine any indigenous faction mustering sufficient support to bring it down. The Army appears to have remained loyal through the trying period since Sihanouk's ouster with only a few exceptions, including the defection of several units in battle. There are probably elements in the Army who

- 16 -

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are pro-Sihanouk or who are disturbed by the troubles that have befallen Cambodia, or who are merely upset because their chances of getting killed have increased and their opportunities for lucrative profits from the Communists have been shut off. Such factions might try to seize power either to bring Sihanouk back or to make their own "deal" with the Communists. But so far we have no evidence of such factions, or for that matter, of any "young Turk" element or similar clique in the Army.

23. Moreover, as the base of the new government's power, not only is the Army more important in the new situation, but its rapid expansion has brought more authority and opportunity to those already on board. And in this new environment, already three young brigadier generals have emerged as important new figures around Lon Nol. It seems likely that any change in the new Cambodian government, will either come from the higher levels of the Army ranks, or require its support. Therefore, if pressures from the elite or the youth forced Lon Nol from his titular position, or even if Lon Nol were to become the victim of some Army coup, it seems more likely than not that the dynamics of the new situation would result in his succession by an officer of similar political stamp.

- 17 -

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24. The Buddhists. The Buddhist clergy is an influential force in Cambodian life, particularly in the rural villages. Historically, unlike the Buddhist clergy in some other countries, the Cambodian monks have been generally apolitical. Nevertheless, because of their importance the new regime moved quickly to obtain the support of Buddhist leaders, but the lower clergy has been slow in responding to requests to rally peasant support for the Lon Nol government. The import of this, however, is unclear.

25. The Peasantry. More than 80 percent of Cambodians are peasants, leading traditional, village-oriented lives. Conservative and religious, they have always had great respect for the royal family and genuinely loved Sihanouk, providing the broadest base for his leadership. As anticipated, the peasantry has been most affronted by Sihanouk's removal and slowest to evidence approval of the new regime. But Cambodian governments have rarely had much real influence at the village level and the fact that there has been little actual resistance to the new regime among the peasants -- or to the Communists for that matter -- may be due to apathy as much as anything else. We have little idea of what the peasants think of the current situation, but

- 18 -

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it is among them that Sihanouk's Communist-supported insurgency has the best prospect of gathering support and manpower.

26. Sihanouk's Following. There is little question that Sihanouk and his entourage presently constitute a credible alternative regime to many Cambodians. At the same time, his embrace of the Chinese and Vietnamese Communists -- particularly the latter -- has hurt him in Cambodia. Many among the elite, the students, and the Army -- who were fence-sitters when Lon Nol first took over -- were won over as a result of Sihanouk's shameless embrace of the Asian Communists. Moreover, although Sihanouk probably has the sympathies of many peasants and some of the Buddhist clergy, there is no viable apparatus available to him in Cambodia except that which Hanoi can provide.

27. Ethnic Minorities. In Cambodia, the Vietnamese and Chinese ethnic minorities -- some 300-400,000 in each group -- have been regarded by the new leadership as potential assets for the Communists; most are pro-Communist. About one-third of each of these minority groups live in Phnom Penh itself and their presence, particularly the Vietnamese, is disturbing to the government. The Vietnamese community contains a sizeable

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Vietnamese Communist apparatus, including an entire "Rear Services Group" which has long supported the war effort in South Vietnam. The evacuation of some 90,000 ethnic Vietnamese to South Vietnam since the first of May (with some 50,000 more waiting to depart) may have reduced the potential for Communist mischief in Phnom Penh but there are still more than 200,000 Vietnamese spread around the rural areas of Cambodia. Hanoi is relying on these ethnic brethren for support and, to some extent, for manpower. The influential Chinese minority is regarded by the regime as a less serious security problem. The Chinese are considered relatively apolitical; moreover, historically animosities between Chinese and Cambodians have not been great.

28. Economic Factors. The rising tempo of war has confronted the Cambodian government with serious economic problems. Defense costs, of course, have skyrocketed, while wartime destruction and transport dislocations have greatly reduced governmental revenues from exports of rubber and rice. Manufacturing, such as it is, has also been slowed, in part because of the departure of large numbers of skilled Vietnamese workers. On the other hand, there is no shortage of food; rice, sugar, vegetables and meat are plentiful and likely to

- 20 -

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remain so for many months. Moreover, there is as yet no shortage of gasoline or other fuels in Phnom Penh. The peasant and village economy, resilient as always, is also in tolerable shape. The worst economic problem, therefore, will be the loss of hard currency export earnings. This will diminish the government's ability to purchase defense equipment and reduce the likelihood that it can pay its burgeoning armed forces without serious inflation. The personnel costs alone, including salaries, for the troops already in uniform will add at least \$20 million a year to the defense allocation, which in 1969 amounted to \$43 million -- about one-third of the total budget.

III. PROSPECTS

29. Without outside interference, the Lon Nol regime would have a good chance of maintaining its control over most of Cambodia's populated regions. Though Sihanouk probably retains a fair measure of popularity in the countryside, his supporters are not strong in the cities and major towns, nor are his followers of a cast of mind to rise up in any spontaneous rebellion in his behalf -- particularly after the early demonstrations in Kompong Cham were decisively put down by

- 21 -

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Cambodian Army gunfire. Economic problems, though of concern to the urban sector, do not seriously disturb the bulk of the village populace. Such problems as exist in the money economy are susceptible of quick remedies from outside donors, provided the necessary imports can be transported to major population centers. Finally, the Army, though hardly a match for VC/NVA units, could cope with the threat posed by Khmer dissidents now in the field.

30. All this, however, is idle speculation. VC/NVA units will not leave Cambodia voluntarily (short of Allied surrender) nor will they willingly cease attacks in the Cambodian interior or their efforts to recruit and train Khmer partisan units. Thus, the prospect in Cambodia is for something like another Laos: uncertain government control of major urban areas and adjacent agricultural districts, and Communist control of relatively secure base areas and scattered highland, forest and swampland redoubts from which to mount sporadic attacks into a contested countryside.*

* The pattern of "ink blots" is difficult to discern at present. At a minimum, Hanoi seems likely to try to hold the strategic northeast, scattered sectors further south along the Vietnamese border, and a good part of northern Cambodia as well as some mountainous areas of the southwest. Other target areas for the Communists will be choice terrain near major road, rail, and river links to Thailand, South Vietnam, and the sea.

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This situation, moreover, is likely to develop in the coming months no matter what the level of Allied military support, barring some massive ground intervention. On the other hand, absence of a substantial and sustained Allied ground and air effort would greatly accelerate the deterioration; Lon Nol might not last out the year.

- 23 -

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